DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 489 CS 504 578

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TITLE An Opinion on Communication Competence.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (69th, Washington, DC, November 10-13, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; *Interpersonal Competence; Language Attitudes; Language Processing; Persuasive Discourse; *Speech Communication; *Speech Instruction; Theories

ABSTRACT

Since the concept of "communication competence" is a relatively recent development in the field of speech communication, there is as yet no universal agreement as to its definition and constitution. However, it seems that the purpose of the study of communication competence is to inform classroom instruction. The efforts to define and understand the concept are directed to helping instructors understand and explain everyday speech communication in such a way that gives more control over its use, in order to teach their students to have more control over their communicative behavior. Some basic assumptions about this concept include the following: people's behavior appears to be made up of discrete components that can be referred to as skills, people show a wide range of these skills, people apply these skills to different situations with varying success, and people can get better at their communicative behavior. Some teachers' concerns include: describing levels of ability, discerning situations that form the basis for communicative behavior, defining success and failure in given situations, and being able to predict success in future behavior. (CRH)

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CS 504 578

AN OPINION ON COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

by
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The concept of "communication competence" is a relatively recent development in the field of speech communication. As with any new (and a lot of old) theory, the concept does not yet enjoy universal agreement as to its definition and constitution. Part of the fun of being in a dynamic discipline is participating in the development definition of new idea. So, here we go again.

This is an opinion paper. It represents some thinking I have done regarding communication competence. When I first began thinking about a position paper for this seminar, I asked myself, "Why do we have this concept in the first place?" From there I went on to develop an opinion, a position, regarding communication competence and, in this paper, I've developed the opinions implications regarding theory, research, curriculum, and assessment. I am curious to know what the response to this opinion will be.

Assumptions

So why did we start this in the first place? Who cares about communication competence? Why? What is it supposed to do for us? The concept appears to have some practical utility for those of us in speech communication. It gets us published and has helped us to articulate a position to various governmental and educational agencies. But behind all that, what purpose does the concept serve? Here's my opinion.

1. The purpose of the study of communication competence is to inform classroom instruction.

Isn't that it? Isn't the motivation propelling these efforts the desire to help students and ourselves become better communicators? Our effort here define and understand the concept are directed to helping us understand and explain everyday speech communication in such a way so that we have more control over its use and thus we can teach our students to have more control over their own communicative behavior. Essentially, this is the ultimate goal of all speech communication theory and research. We want to understand how the process works, gain more control, and increase our ability to predict the outcome of certain kinds of communication behavior. So work on the concept of communication competence extends this fundamental goal of our profession. Instruction and the improvement of individuals ability to use the spoken work skillfully is the raison d'etre of the concept of communication competence.

2. Since we are using this concept to inform the teaching of people, it may be useful to state some basic opinions related to these individuals. These assumptions will influence whatever implications flow from a conception of communication competence.

   a. People's communicative behavior appears to be made up of more or less discrete components that we can refer to as skills.

   b. People show a wide range of skill levels in communicative behavior.

   c. An individual can show a wide range of skill levels in the various components of his/her communicative behavior.

   d. People apply these skills to different situations with varying degrees of success.

   e. People can get better at their communicative behavior.

   f. We can't control for everything so we never know exactly how people will act.

While these may seem to be fairly obvious, they do have implications for a concept of communication competence.

3. The concept needs, in some form, to account for differing levels of ability. We can't describe all levels, therefore the concept needs to describe what might be called "benchmark" levels in skill development.

4. The concept needs to be able to identify the individual skills that constitute a person's overall "competence."

5. The concept needs to include the situation that forms the basis for communicative behavior.

6. The concept needs to account for and define success in a given situation and to have the ability to predict success in future actions.

Thus far, we have a definition of the basic goal of communication competence, some assumptions about people that influence the concept, and some implications of those assumptions. Let us now turn to current work on communication competence to see if these concerns are answered.

Current Theory

There is no shortage of written material on the subject of communication competence. Yet, as was suggested earlier, there is little agreement on the definition or the constitution of the concept. This section reviews some of those writings and compares them to the concerns listed on the previous section.

Let us first take a look at the "levels of skill" idea. Do our present theories account for this? Not exactly. Competence is generally (in education circles, at least) seen as a basic level of skill. People write about minimal competencies and basic skills with the general idea that it serves as some minimally acceptable level. That is the way the definition that Larson et al (1978) can be viewed; "the ability to demonstrate the knowledge of the socially appropriate behavior in a given situation." It describes a minimal level - the ability to function appropriatly. But as Larson (1978) has pointed out, we must be able to go beyond that level. Do we have concepts that do this? The only one that seems evident is the notion of "effectiveness."

This is usually equated with the achievement of personal of interpersonal goals. While it can be shown that a person can be effective without being competent, I think we can still view effectiveness as a higher level of skill. But, it appears that this is all we have. There is no word or concept for the upper range of communication skill (perhaps what Maslow refered to as "peak communication"). We do not have descriptors for intermediate levels. Clearly, it would be impossible to identify every level, but I do think our work and research needs to help establish "benchmark" levels in the development of a person's communicative ability.

Next, let's look at the relationship between individual skills and overall "competence." Carroll (1980) makes a good case for not attempting to develop a test of general competence, but instead to focus on individual skills and to establish testing levels within those skills. We are not clear as to the skills that could constitute a perception of overall competence, so we are faced with a choice. Is it even possible to develop a clear description of overall competence or should we put our efforts into examing individual skills? What is the relationship between a group of skills and a generalized notion of competence?

This also relates to the next point (#5). Different situations require different behaviors. Thus if we are to explain and predict the function and success of a person's communicative behavior, we need to know the situation he/she will be acting in well enough to understand what will be both appropriate and effective. It appears that our instructional efforts need to be grounded on situations. But are they? Generally not. We make the assumption that there are a set of skills that apply to all (or most) situations, that may be true, but we need to know to what degree it is true.

Finally (for this section) we need to develop our predictive ability. If we are to teach and train students of any age, we must be able to give some assurances about their future success in various communication situations. For example, if we teach a class in interviewing, and an employer asks us for a prediction of a particular student's success in future interview situations, what do we say? "I think they will do fine?" So far, our research doesn't allow us to make statements with much more precision than that. I think we need to. So if we are to develop an effective program of theory and instruction in communication competence, we must devote time and energy to developing our predictive ability. Cleary, we will never be able to predict with 100% accuracy, but I think we can improve the probability of our predictions.

Curriculum Development

These ideas seem to have two major directions for instructional research and curriculum development.

First, we can develop the "benchmark" idea more fully. We look at the two mentioned earlier, communication competence and communication effectiveness, we obviously must have some way to be separating the two concepts. The defining characteristics presently associated with the two include appropriateness as the defining characteristic of compentence and goal attainment as the criteria for effectiveness. These two might be oversimplistic and almost assuredly are not the only criteria available, but they are clear and obvious. For instructional efforts, we need criteria that are clear, obvious, and teachable. If used, these criteria have some fairly obvious applications to instructional development. We could develop a program along the following lines.

Communication skill education in the elementary grades could be partially devoted to teaching children about norms, communication rituals, role-taking, decision making regarding roles, and skill in the use of various communication strategies in assessing and developing communicatively"appropiate" behavior. The second benchmark is "effectiveness." As this is usually seen as the achievement of some sort of personal goal through the use of the communication process, students could be taught rhetoric, persuasion, goal analysis, communication strategies, etc, all skills that develop effectiveness. It is clear that it is possible for a person to be incompetent and ineffective at the same time, competent while being ineffective, incompetent while being effective, and competent while being effective. There two concepts surely aren't the only ones we will come up with to describe the "levels" of communication skill. But I think we do need them. "Competence" and "effectiveness" are not perfect, but they do give us two working concepts that have fairly clear behavioral criteria associated with them. That is what we need, concepts that have reality in behavior, and we cannot let ourselves lose sight of that.

It would be possible to develop an articulate, sequential instruction program that became increasingly complex as it built on a basic framework. But a fundamental point about this first direction, this development of benchmark levels, is that it is tied to specific situations. We are teaching knowledge, but in this dimension, we are primarily interested in teaching students how to be competent and effective in specific situations. These situations could range from "talking to Grandma on the phone" to "communication skills for the courtroom." We would have a broad range of situations, varying in degrees of complexity, but the instruction is clearly aimed at teaching the student how to handle a specific situation. This is already done in certain

English as a Second Language training classes. In a program developed through the British Council's English Language Division (Carroll, 1980) to improve a non-native speaker's ability to use English, instructors will carefully examine the kinds of situations the student (usually adults) will face. Then they analyze the communicative demands present in the situation, break these out into skill components, and develop a specialized instructional program for that student designed to help him/her achieve the skills necessary to handle the situation. The main goal of the program is to teach the student how to communicate in specific situations. This idea has wide applicability for our instructional programs and we could do much to improve our ability to teach students to communicate more skillfully. In summary, this first direction involves the identification of benchmark skill levels designed to help us teach students (of any age) to communicate in specific situations.

The second major direction involves non-specific teaching. Clearly, we do not know all the various situations that a given student will face, and the first direction discussed above, will work only for situations we can specify. Thus we must have at least one alternative. This second direction could be called predictive or probability teaching.

We don't know exactly what situations the student will face, so we try to equip him or her with sufficient communication tools to handle most situations effectively. Here we are attempting to increase the probability the student will communicate effectively, we are trying to predict whether or not the student will be successful. That is, if we help the student learn certain skills, and the student demonstrates a reasonable degree of facility with that skill (or set up skills), then we can predict within a certain range of probability how successful a student might be in future, unspecified communication situations.

It seems fairly obvious that some skills (empathy, openess, non-verbal sensitivity, etc.) are useful in virtually every situation. Research would be needed to tell us what other skills also might be included in this group. We would be looking for a set of skills that could account for a significant percentage of the variance in a judgment of success. Now, is this reasonable? Is there a set of skills that can account for effectiveness in most (if not all) situations? Some have been suggested - interaction management, social insight (empathy), open mindedness, behavioral flexibility, and others. The skills identified so far do not account for all (or even most) of the variance but it does account for some. The next question is whether or not we can discover the other skills that will allow us to account for a significant percentage of the variance. But, the point is still there - when we don't know exactly what we are teaching our students to do, all we can rely on is a set of generalized skills and a degree of prediction. Specifying their skills at the degree of prediction to a clear line of research for our profession.

To wrap up this section, I believe the theories thus far developed in communication competence are leading in two different but parallel directions in instructional programs. First, we can develop research lines that identify the communication behavior requirement for specific situations. These behavior requirements could be developed for different benchmark levels - for example, competence and effectiveness (and others that could be identified). The research could answer questions like "If you want to be able to do." Instructional programs could be developed to teach these levels. This would enable us to do a much better job with communication skills training.

Next is the research and instruction into non-specific situation communication. Research would attempt to identify the generalized communication skills

that would allow us to predict the probability of success. Instuctional programs would be designed to help students develop these skills.

The final section of this paper will examine the implications of these ideas on the assessment of communication competence.

Assessment

There has been a general movement in the past five to eight years to develop a single test of communication competence. These efforts have been productive, for example, this last year the Speech Communication Association published the Communication Competence Assessment Instrument developed by Rebecca Rubin. This test does and will have wide applicability. Early work by John Wilmann also moved in the direction of a single test.

However, following the line of reasoning developed so far in this paper, a single test of communication competence is not the solution and may be leading us in the wrong direction. The reasoning being developed so far here has many implications for assessment. The basic point is that we would need to develop two testing patterns. Let us look at how it would effect the situation specific and then the situation non-specific line of instruction.

The testing pattern for the situation-specific instruction would involve the development of quite a few criterion-referenced tests. One test would not fulfill the need. As each situation is researched, competencies identified, and skills taught, a testing programwould need to be developed for that situation. Now there are a lot of different situations, and it would be impossible and probably a little silly to try to deal with them all. We would have to discover some way of simplifying the testing procedure. The most obvious way would be to develop a set of guidelines for the construction of situation related testing procedures. This would be farily simple as most of the tests would be tied to specific communicative behavioral critieris. The material on performance testing

presents some useful suggestions for this. But the point for testing in this type of instruction is that one test will not work. Tests and assessment procedures grounded in specific behavioral criteria and in the demands of the situation are necessary if situation-specific instruction is to succeed.

The other testing pattern would take a different course and would probably be norm-referenced. In situation non-specific instruction we are interested in identifying the skills that would allow us to predict (within a certain range of probability) the future success of a student. If we are attempting to teach competence, which in this case is defined by the criteria of "appropriateness," we must look to that criteria for a standard of judgment. Appropriateness is a socially judged phenomena. We have to look to the situation and to the people within the situation for a judgment of this nature. That means we would gather a large number of opinions as the who performs appropriately (or effectively, etc.) in a variety of situations, then test people at the top of this judgmentscale and at the bottom for specific speech communication skills. Then do something like multiple regression analysis to determine which skills seem to account for the variance in social judgment. Repeated enough times (whatever that is) for different situations and people, we would get a picture of the groupings of speech communication skills that would lead to a prediction of success. Then a battery of tests (or a single comprehensive test) could be developed complete with norms that we could use to assess the general level of communication skill of an individual. By comparing the person's socre to the set of norms, we could develop a prediction about that person's general level of success in future communication encounters.

These two testing patterns would take a fair amount of work, but it would give us a far more sophisticated way of gauging an individual's ability. It certainly isn't foolproof, but I believe it would represent a move in a productive direction.

Conclusion

As I said in the beginning of the paper, this represents an opinion. At this point, we can ask a number of questions: is this reasonable? are these the kind of goals for our instruction? is this the type of approach that will allow us to achieve these goals? What has been left out?

Our instructional programs are not solely designed to teach skills, and this represents only one prong of a three-pronged educational effort that includes the cognitive and affective domains. I do believe that the concept of communication competence lies squarely in the skill or behavioral domain. It is a concept aimed at training, and training is only one part of education. But it is a part that we need to effectively deal with. I am looking forward to your response.